



Concerning Consequences: What Do I Do When...?

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Any discussion about teaching students with autism spectrum disorders in school settings will invariably turn to a discussion about the role of consequences in managing inappropriate behavior. Usually the discussion takes the form of this question: What do I do when "Johnny" does . . . ?

Few educators would contest that consequence interventions have long dominated the lion's share of our behavior management efforts. The result is that consequences have become narrowly linked with managing inappropriate behavior, and it is the misguided use of consequences for inappropriate behavior that is of concern. Fortunately, as our efforts shift toward prevention of challenging behavior, questions about consequences should no longer monopolize our efforts and energies. Nonetheless, for the present, it represents a valid question which warrants discussion and some ideas about direction. The discussion begins by addressing the purpose of consequences, followed by an examination of how consequences are misused, and, finally, some ways to use them more effectively.

What is the purpose of consequences?

Consequences have three purposes when used to manage student behavior: (1) reinforcement to strengthen behavior; (2) punishment to weaken undesirable behavior; and (3) neutralization of behavior in a crisis. Too often our focus lies on the second of these three purposes, using consequences solely to eliminate behavior.

Why do negative consequence interventions still dominate our efforts?

Negative consequences meant to punish (i.e., decrease) behavior are a familiar entity. Responses to problem behavior, such as verbal reprimands, time out, and response costs (to name only a few), have a long history in school settings. And they often achieve results. For most students, negative consequences work exceedingly well, at least on the surface. They are the behavior management version of a quick fix because they generally require low effort and produce a quick change. Unfortunately, for many individuals, and especially those with an autism spectrum disorder, the fix is short lived, overly simplistic, and tends to suggest that what is needed in the future is merely a stronger negative consequence. It also fosters an elusive and never ending search for the perfect consequence.

How are consequences misused?

Below are some ways consequences for inappropriate behavior are commonly misused in school settings, followed by suggestions for more effective use:

- Consequences are applied continuously and for long periods of time, **even when ineffective**.

Although negative consequences represent tangible evidence to others (e.g., the principal, other staff, parents, the student) that something is being done about inappropriate behavior, too often they are applied reflexively, without much consideration for their individual effectiveness or how the person perceives them. For many students with autism spectrum disorders, repeated use of negative consequences quickly loses effectiveness as the student becomes immune to their use. For others, consequences simply serve to heighten anxiety levels

when the student is doing what is logical to him or her. They also send the message that the people and activities in the settings are worth avoiding.

- Consequences are predetermined by school policy **without regard to individual student needs**.

The first and foremost job of schools is to establish safe and effective environments conducive to learning for all students. The second job is to be responsive to individual student needs. Unfortunately, students with autism, Asperger's syndrome and other pervasive developmental disorders are often locked into school-wide discipline practices incongruent with their needs—especially when such practices focus on exclusion, suspension, or expulsion instead of instruction and inclusion. The assumption that tough discipline is effective discipline often supersedes the necessary individualization of responses to problem behavior.

- Certain consequences are assumed to be universally punishing (e.g., reprimands).

The effect that a consequence has on future behavior determines whether we label it as punishment or reinforcement. If a behavior increases in frequency or strength we say it has been reinforced, and the consequence we applied is therefore a reinforcer. If a behavior decreases in frequency or strength we say it has been punished, and the consequence we applied is therefore a punisher. It is important to remember that these terms are merely descriptive ones which indicate whether behavior is strengthened or weakened. Also important to remember is that consequences are perceived differently across individuals. A punisher for one individual is a reinforcer for another. Unfortunately, when addressing behavioral consequences there is a strong tendency to assume the effect in advance. For example, we assume that praise and other social interactions are reinforcing to everyone when in fact they can be quite aversive—especially to individuals uncomfortable with social interaction. Likewise, scolding is generally considered punishment when in fact it may actually be reinforcing—especially in situations where an individual desires attention but cannot gain it except through problem behavior.

- Consequences are used without regard to what the student is trying to achieve through the behavior (i.e., function).

Of particular importance when examining consequences is to determine the purpose or function the behavior serves for the individual. Knowing the purpose has direct relevance for determining how to respond to the behavior. For example, a student with an autism spectrum disorder who experiences general difficulty with academic tasks may become aggressive out of frustration, confusion, or boredom. Removing the individual as punishment "for being bad" may not actually be punishment at all, but rather reinforcement. In order to know the effect of the consequence of removal, we must look to see the effect over time. If the student continues aggression during academic tasks, we can assume that removing the student is reinforcing. If the student stops being aggressive we can say the behavior was punished.

- Consequences are often assumed to elicit desirable behaviors which the student may in reality not know how to perform.

Simply stated, **a student may not know what to do when only told what not to do**. Many individuals with autism will require more explicit instruction on performing alternative behaviors before they can be expected to replace inappropriate ones. Although it is true that consequences can suppress behavior by literally trampling over its function, it is not true that they can teach the individual something they do not know how to do.

How can consequences be used more effectively?

The following questions and considerations are meant to promote a more effective use of consequences:

- Determine consequences by individual need and situation. The initial consideration is: Does the behavior require a consequence? If so, what effect will the consequence have now and over time?

- Consider that predetermined consequences may be ineffective and incompatible with behavioral functions. A lot of energy is spent on creating environmental and staff consistency for students with autism spectrum disorders. Though this is sound instructional advice, when addressing problem behavior it is also logical to consider whether consistent responses may prove problematic when they don't meet the function of the behavior at any given moment.
- When possible, ignore the problem behavior while establishing future instructional situations to teach the alternative behavior. Then provide immediate, powerful, and consistent reinforcement for performing the alternative. Remember that if the alternative behavior is not sufficiently effective and efficient in achieving desired outcomes, then the individual will likely re-engage in the problem behavior.
- Consider whether the consequence is instructive or only suppressive. Does the consequence actually help the person to learn an alternative behavior the next time the same or a similar situation arises?
- Do not assume ineffective consequences will become effective if used long enough or if strengthened. If individual needs are not met, the behavior will likely continue.
- Finally, gather ongoing functional assessment information to understand the conditions under which behavior occurs and does not occur. Understanding the conditions under which behavior occurs can help shift the focus to prevention and instruction and reduce the need for consequences which serve as punishment.

Shifting away from reliance on negative consequences to addressing problem behavior is difficult. On a broad level it will require ongoing examination of some well-established educational practices. On a personal level it will require individual reflection on our own behavior. Both can result in a more appropriate use of consequences to build skills with long-term utility for students with autism spectrum disorders.

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